

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

I Samuel 26: 2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23 Psalm 103 I Corinthians 15: 45-49 Luke 6: 27-38

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

A friend said that when she was a girl she heard today's gospel in church and thought, "That's awfully hard! But no one does it in my church, so I don't have to do it." If ever I were tempted to change the gospel reading, this would be one of those Sundays I would give in and look for an easier one. (Actually, there are no "easy" passages, but some seem to require less of a gut-wrenching struggle for the preacher.)

In the Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up this gospel flies in the face of the behavior we learned from earliest childhood. You would be laughed to scorn if you suggested "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." And, of course, no one would have suggested, "turn the other cheek." Even if it were noted, "Jesus said it," someone would surely have retorted, "Yeah, well that was back then, this is now." Or, "Well he could do it because he was God, he can't expect us mere humans to do that." And since it was Brooklyn, some kid would certainly have added, "Whada ya nutz?"

You can see why this preacher would be tempted to find another reading. Who wouldn't? There are just too many innocent people suffering at the hands of tyrants in the world to make this passage acceptable at first glance. Maybe we would be "nutz" to take it seriously. But then again, considering the condition of our world, nothing else seems to be working. Let's not dismiss this passage too handily. Let's give it a chance to speak its liberating message to us.

Jesus is asking a lot, a whole lot! It's perfectly clear that he isn't just presenting a slightly improved way to live, an ethical code a notch or two above other such codes. He's not just proposing a way of behaving that good people, with extra effort, might try. "Be just a bit kinder...bite your lip and forgive one more time..." If he were doing that, we wouldn't need him, we could, with effort, manage it on our own and then collect our hard-earned reward from God.

Jesus is introducing something entirely new. Not just a new code of ethics; but a whole new age with an entirely new way to live with one another. Those who enter this "new way", this new reign, find themselves animated by a different Spirit. Their whole lives are changed, down to the very core. They now look at life through a different lens. What seems so contrary to ordinary human wisdom, now comes, as if by "second nature, for the citizen of God's

dominion.” The members of the reign whose presence Jesus announces, see themselves and others by the light Jesus has introduced into the world.

I don’t look upon Jesus’ teachings as things I must do to please God, to earn merit or to get to heaven. Rather, I first believe that he has done something radically new in my life, as a result, that new life in me urges and motivates me to an entirely new way to live. It is because I have this new life that I can receive these teachings as a guide to another way of interpreting my life and the life of those around me. Through my gospel eyes and ears, I take in the world differently and I respond to it differently. When wronged I try to respond in a way that reflects Jesus’ ongoing presence living in me. I know that I cannot continue to act and react as everyone else does. That would mean Jesus is dead, that his resurrection never took place and that his Spirit does not live in the world. Rather, the life he lived has become a possibility for me too. What would seem impossible behavior, based on the usual human reckoning, now is possible. Now it is possible to love and forgive in the way Jesus did.

The most difficult part of Jesus’ teaching is to consider its consequences for those who have suffered abuse, who have been victimized. Some people might misinterpret Jesus and hear him saying that they are to remain victims and suffer abuse. Jesus isn’t telling us to be victims. (I am helped in interpreting this passage by the insights of Fred Craddock and Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.) Craddock reminds us that the people to whom Jesus is speaking are the most poor, victims of abusive Roman power and wealthy land owners. He suggests Jesus’ teachings are about how not to be a victim.

In verses 27-31 Jesus is saying: take charge of your life and the situation, by taking the initiative in loving, caring and giving. The second section of this passage (32-36) is like the first, telling us not to reciprocate. But where the former was applied towards those who mistreat us, this section is applied to those who treat us favorably. In both cases, our behavior is not determined by either a friend or an enemy. We act the way we do because of the God we worship, “be merciful as your Father is merciful.” God does not hold back forgiveness from those who have previously not been friends with God. Nor does God treat harshly those who have not previously loved God. Our norm is God—not society. If God is the criteria for our behavior, then how dependent we are on God’s graciousness to help us fulfill this teaching!

The third section (verses 32-36) underlines just how generous God has been to us, “...a good measure, packed together, shaken down and overflowing will be poured into you lap.” This verse seems to overflow and dominate the last one that speaks of getting back to the extent that we give others. God is busy at work, transforming and encouraging us to be to others what God has been to us. Jesus doesn’t allow us to draw a circle around family, friends and good

neighbors, placing only them under the umbrella of our love. He won't let us be the determinant of who is "deserving" of our beneficence. He bursts through our categories and beyond our natural inclinations to love and enables us to reflect the divine presence at work in us.

In addressing the case of victims, Robert Schrieter says, "... God initiates the work of reconciliation in the lives of the victims. Ordinarily we would expect reconciliation to begin with the repentance of the wrongdoers. But experience shows that wrongdoers are rarely willing to acknowledge what they have done or to come forward of their own accord. If reconciliation depended entirely upon the wrongdoers' initiative, there would be next to no reconciliation at all.

God begins with the victim, restoring to the victim the humanity which the wrongdoer has tried to wrest away or to destroy. This restoration of humanity might be considered the very heart of reconciliation. The experience of reconciliation is the experience of grace—the restoration of ones' damaged humanity in a life-giving relationship with God (Gen 1:26). It is that image by which humanity might mirror divinity, by which humanity comes into communion with divinity, that is restored. That God would begin with the victim, and not the evildoer, is consistent with divine activity in history. God takes the side of the poor, the widowed and the orphaned, the oppressed and the imprisoned. It is in the ultimate victim, God's son Jesus Christ, that God begins the process that leads to the reconciliation of the whole world in Christ (Col; 1:20)". (see below, pages 14-15)

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Robert J. Schrieter, C.P.P.S. *THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION: SPIRITUALITY & STRATEGIES*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1998 (paper, 136 pages).

Schrieter presents a spirituality of both individual and social reconciliation based on Jesus' resurrection. He shows how, with a spirituality of reconciliation, we can then create an environment for reconciliation to help us deal with violence in society, our neighborhoods and families.

QUOTABLE

I am certain that Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talk glibly about the easiness of the moral life. He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God. So

when Jesus said, “Love your enemy,” he was not unmindful of its stringent qualities. Yet he meant every word of it. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.

Let us be practical and ask the question, How do we love our enemies?

First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He [sic] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. It is impossible even to begin the act of loving one’s enemies without the prior acceptance of the necessity, over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil and injury upon us. It is also necessary to realize that the forgiving act must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged, the victim of some great hurt, the recipient of some tortuous injustice, the absorber of some terrible act of oppression. The wrongdoer may request forgiveness. He may come to himself, and , like the prodigal son, move up some dusty road, his heart palpitating with the desire for forgiveness. But only the injured neighbor, the loving father back home, can really pour out the warm water of forgiveness.

----Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in RICHER FARE: REFLECTION ON THE SUNDAY READINGS, Gail Ramshaw, pages 161-2.